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9th Pan-European Conference on IR: Peacebuilding
Politics take Centre Stage again
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2
Oct**Author :** politicalsettlements **Category :** ConceptualisingPolitical Settlements (<http://www.politicalsettlements.org/category/themes/concepts/>), GJA

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CONFERENCE/)**9th Pan-European Conference on IR: Peacebuilding Politics take Centre Stage again**

In the following I will present thoughts that developed while participating in a panel on political settlements at the 9th Pan-European Conference on International Relations (<http://www.paneuropeanconference.org/2015/>) in Giardini Naxos, Sicily. Some years after the notable decline of interest in topics like peacebuilding and conflict transformation in International Relations and related disciplines, in part due scholarly critique of the 'liberal peacebuilding' approach, these issues seem to be in the midst of a striking comeback. It is hardly by chance that the upcoming 2016 International Studies Association (ISA) General Convention deals with the overarching topic 'exploring peace'. On a similar note, the just-completed Pan-European Conference on IR by the European ISA discussed 'the worlds of violence'.

While both conference topics try to accommodate traditional IR approaches, as well as critical IR and related disciplines, the program of the EISA conference particularly demonstrated a remarkable turn back from issues of global governance and integration, which dominated discussions in the latter half of the 2000s in the aftermath of international 'crises', to topics of violent conflict and peacebuilding. Along with this shift goes the often-cited 'local turn' that is, a focus on local contexts and analysis, that now seems to have taken sure footing in European IR circles, at least. The local turn is not only seen in empirical accounts, where the local always showed some presence in IR debates, it is now also appearing on the theoretical panels where local politics, especially with regard to violence-to-peace transitions, are discussed and conceptualised. The times of the 'big debates' of old school IR seem to have given way to a new more contextualised approach.

The local turn goes along with an increasing notion of complexity, contrasting the epistemological optimism attached with the early stretch of then-predominant liberal peacebuilding debates. Complex systems theory seems to take up an important role, with important connections to political settlements approach. Political settlements analysis, framed in the context of the local and complexity turn, should have an important role to play – and valuable contributions to make – in analytical debates on peace- and statebuilding, but also in IR in general. However, as Oliver Richmond (<http://www.manchester.ac.uk/research/Oliver.richmond/research>) reminded us in his discussion of one of the papers dealing with the political settlement approach, the positive contribution of the concept contrasts with the risk of replicating

an international order that, while still widely perceived as immutable, is on the verge of a rapid and massive transformation.

Both factors, the increasingly acknowledged need for theories to reflect complexity instead of reducing it, and the contingent nature of the international, are difficult to square with research uptake. Development and foreign policy actors especially look for applicability and linearity and – perfectly understandably – want to get guidelines on how to make things ‘better’. Complexity theory, however, tells us that the ‘good’ is just not out there; and even if it was, there is no predictable way to achieve it. This does not mean that there are no ways of practical engagement with given realities but there is a challenge for current scholarship.

From the experiences of the EISA conference and the debates there, one of the main upcoming challenges will be the translation of this renewed focus on the local, and the scholarly commitment to accept complexity as a given condition also for theory development, to think through the implications for the policy world. This effort will require a response from both sides. Research on issues of violent conflict and peacebuilding, on the one hand, has a responsibility to think about practical change; hence, it must develop suggestions of how to engage in the context of unpredictability. What are the policy implications of ‘complexity’? On the other hand, policy actors, at least in the long run, will have no other choice but to wave goodbye to their common practices of tool-box approaches and results based management in fragile conditions – something that they seem prepared to do. While we will be able to learn more about how complex social systems – as political settlements – work, we probably never will be able to find precise pathways to clearly defined outcomes. And this is a rather good thing, as I would argue.

By Dr Jan Pospisil (<http://www.politicalsettlements.org/about/who/people/>)

Jan’s Presentation on: Political Settlements Transformation: Engagement with the Unpredictable?
(<http://www.politicalsettlements.org/resources/>)

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